

# The ‘strife of cups’: Greek vases at the symposium

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## Symposia and society: the Athenian party scene

The Greek *symposion*, better known by its Latinized form, *symposium*, was not just a party but THE social setting for the male Greek aristocrat, where he forged friendships and made political alliances. While informality was not out of place in such a setting, each symposium was formally organized in a particular private venue, often someone’s home. As at most drinking parties, a competitive spirit infused these gatherings, as participants endeavoured to outdo each other in wit, knowledge, music, or sex. Of course they played silly games: ‘the strife of cups’ is the way an ancient writer, Dionysios Khalkos, described *kottabos*, a popular symposium game played by the central man in a scene on the front of a bell krater in Altenburg (right). The game involved flicking a few drops of wine from the bottom of a cup onto a specified target.

The friendly setting encouraged participants to exchange ideas on war, religion, politics, or foreign affairs, as well as sex and everyday life, and to play out other-world scenarios. Yet symposia only permitted or provided such ‘liberation’ from everyday restraints because they were private events, open to a restricted group – aristocratic citizen males – who often adhered to traditional values in their public lives. Symposia thus reinforced and therefore perpetuated some male centred values and attitudes for which ancient Athens has become famous: patriarchy, pederasty, male homosexuality, athleticism, nationalism and enmity of foreigners, especially Easterners. Whether intentionally or not, these values were also transmitted to other groups of people, Greek and non-Greek, in other cities and times (including our own), through the art that it generated.

## Pouring and poring over vases

The literary focus of the symposium – poems, songs, and speeches – has ensured that some details of such events are remembered even now in preserved Greek literature. Yet the literary fragments are few; sometimes snatches of conversation or fragments of drinking songs and poems are found on painted vases. But the wealth of information about symposia has been handed down to us in the form of painted vases made in the sixth and fifth centuries B.C. Although symposia took place around the Greek world (see the Macedonian examples in Mitchell’s article in *Omnibus* 47), and many examples of decorated sympotic vases have been found in Etruscan tombs (see Swaddling on Etruscans in this issue), the best known sympotic vases are those decorated in the red-figure style in Attica, around Athens, where people famously drank out of ceramic cups. Painted vases have played a dual role in memorializing these symposia, just as they played a dual role at the symposia themselves: their forms – kraters and cups – functioned in disseminating the wine, while their decorations – images of sympotic and other activities – allude to issues of sex, politics, and religion that were contemplated at symposia. That is, these vases seem to have had not only a very practical function, which simply allowed the drinking business of the symposium to take place, but also to have played a role in the social and political activity of the symposium, as conversation pieces which set off discussions about soci-

ety and politics through their decoration.

## Using vases to reconstruct the symposium

Vase images of symposia themselves help us to understand the setting of the symposium. They show us the participants, sometimes with special costumes, as well as furniture, pots and other paraphernalia. Yet we should take neither the images nor the words that decorate these vases as objective evidence for ‘real’ symposia. The images of symposia can be taken as artists’ interpretations of these events, tailored to entertain their customers or audiences.

The simplest depiction of a symposium is of a man reclining on a couch or *kline* with one or more cups; smaller attendants help to emphasize the élite status of the symposiast, as on the exterior decoration of a cup-skyphos in Reading (left). Yet a symposium was not a lone pursuit: the couches, numbering from 7 to 15, were arranged in a square room called an *andron* (literally ‘men’s room’), where the symposiasts gathered in private. The fact that it took place inside is sometimes indicated by the presence of baskets or other objects hanging on the walls. On the cup in Oxford on the right, the setting appears to be a vine arbour. Each guest would be given a garland to wear on his head and was offered food before the wine: remnants of food or snacks are shown on the low tables set in front of the participants.

A wide range of vases was used at the symposium. First wine, brought in *amphorai* or *pelikai*, and water, brought in *hydriai*, were mixed in *krateres* (p.23 top) or smaller *stamnoi*, usually placed in the centre of the room. Sometimes the wine would be cooled in a *psykter* (p.25), suspended within the *krater*. The symposiarch, customarily the oldest member of the party, supervised the mixing of the wine with water (usually three or four parts water to one part wine); he also decided how much and how often the mixed wine would be ladled out or decanted into *oinochoai*, or jugs (below). The drink was then ladled or poured by slaves into individual vessels given to symposiasts; sometimes cups themselves depict as part of their decoration the wide variety of vessels used.

Any adult male could take part. Many vases show older (bearded) and younger men reclining side by side. If they are together on the same couch, they were most likely erotically involved. While the symposia were run by and for men, women were not excluded. Both female and male entertainers – gymnasts, flute-players and other musicians, as well as prostitutes – were hired for such events. While slaves such as cup-bearers (above) and those engaged in sex acts were usually shown nude, the entertainers and other participants were normally dressed. An unusual counter-example is the group of women shown on a *psykter*, or wine cooler, in St. Petersburg (p.25). The image of these three women taking on the role of symposiasts is probably a comic inversion.

Symposiasts usually wore *himatia* (cloaks). Yet some Athenian vases (so-called Anacreontic) show men in long gowns, and usually with boots or sandals on their feet and turbans (the Lydian *mitrai*) on their heads (above). These ‘cross-dressers’ are almost certainly not meant to be transvestites but rather men dressed up as Easterners, particularly Lydians, who

were imitated in Greece for their luxurious lifestyle. The eastern attire as well as attributes – parasols as well as musical instruments such as the *barbitos* or Lydian lyre (shown just behind two of the turbaned men on the cup in Oxford, left) associated these symposiasts with the effeminacy as well as luxury that characterized the Orient in the Greek minds. Whether or not the Greek symposiasts actually pretended to be Lydians (for the purposes of ridicule?) or even wished to be Lydians, the symposium was the appropriate context in which to think about it. The Lydian is just one of many different ‘types’ that was contemplated by symposiasts and is reflected in the painted vases – Persians and Amazons also appear (below).

Musical entertainment was normally included at symposia, and symposiasts might try their hand at playing. They also sometimes became erotically involved with the musicians. This was quite natural: eros or love was, as now, a standard theme of songs and poems, as well as an appropriate thing to discuss while drinking. But on the vases there is not always a clear divide between symposiasts and entertainers. While a hired musician is shown on the krater in Altenburg, it seems that the musicians on the other pots shown here are the symposiasts.

A variety of gestures might be meant to suggest that symposiasts were singing, speaking, or reciting poetry. And vases illustrate so many elegant ways of holding drinking cups that one cannot always be sure if the activity represented is drinking, toasting, gesturing (while speaking), *kottabos*, or some other game. However the cup was held, some part of the exterior of the vase would be seen by the ‘audience’. The shallow cups are almost always decorated on the interior as well as the exterior. There is sometimes a clear connection between interior and exterior images, yet a connection was not necessary: the drinker and his companions constitute two different audiences at any moment in time. While a Boeotian man was drinking wine from his cup-skyphos, now in Reading (p.25 bottom), his friends found themselves looking not at him but at a mask, constituted by the eyes and nose, painted on both sides of the exterior. This was not just a joke: Greeks took such masks, and in fact any face shown front-on, as a good way of warding off evil, as well as a way of engaging the viewer.

### Reading vases - reading society

The vast majority of sympotic vases do not, however, show human symposiasts at all, but cover a broad range of activities, both real and mythical, that would have sparked off interesting conversations. Gods and heroes sometimes appear at symposia: Dionysus, the wine god, was seen to enjoy his wine in exactly the same way as mortal aristocrats (he may even be the ‘symposiast’ pictured on the Boeotian skyphos, p.23 bottom). By connecting himself with gods and heroes through images, the male aristocrat at the symposium was reinforcing his status as a member of the social élite. Meanwhile, Dionysus’ followers, the satyrs, would play out these and other stories, imitating gods, heroes, or even symposiasts themselves, drinking or in sexual pursuit. The satyrs, human in form except for their horsy tails and ears, are usually classed as ‘mythological’, although they have almost no role in the Greek myths that have come down to us. The symposium offers a clearer explanation for their huge popularity in Greek art, especially vase paintings: the satyrs provided a mirror or alter ego through which the Greek men could reflect on themselves and their behaviour. When symposiasts had gone beyond the bounds of human propriety and literally became party animals, the satyrs would simply appear as their substitutes, as in scenes of uninhibited communal sex painted on vases.

Central to the sympotic experience was role-play as a means for Greeks to think outside their own day-to-day experience. The inversion of male and female on the Hermitage psykter (right), reinforces the role of men vis-à-vis women through ridicule rather than emulation. And the Anakreontic vases suggest a more

complex interaction of ridicule through emulation: the Athenian aristocrats are permitted, only within the context of the symposium, to take on the appearance or role of Easterners, from which perspective they put themselves in the strongest position to make fun of the foreigners. Such concerns with the worlds of others must have added to the cosmopolitan spirit, intellectual preoccupations, and perhaps even political upheaval that characterized early fifth-century B.C. Athens. After all, normal citizens came to emulate the aristocrats. As the democracy developed, at Athens, at least, the populace adapted the tradition of aristocratic dining to new, democratic forms that are archaeologically attested, such as the erection of the *Tholos* (c. 460 B.C.) in the Agora of Athens, as a venue for civic symposia at which magistrates (*prytaneis*) ate and drank at public expense.

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